

*THE OUTLOOK FOR LAW STUDENTS.*

The following is extracted from an address delivered by Mr. F. K. Munton to the members of the Law Students' Debating Society, at the Law Institution, London, February 24, 1891:—

To approach the subject of the outlook for law students, we must see what is the present state of the practice of the law, whether it is falling or increasing, and how stand the chances, having regard to the existing number of members and those daily coming into the profession, of earning a living by means of it. I daresay it is known to almost everybody here that the solicitor, as we see him, is of comparatively modern growth. Very few, indeed, of the oldest firms in London date back more than a century, and certainly the importance of any solicitor at that time, whether he ultimately founded a firm or not, was very little, compared to the position which he occupies at the present day. If we read the dramatists of the eighteenth century we shall see the view that was then taken of the solicitor, but, as I have to apply myself to the outlook, there is little time to go into the past. I will content myself with merely quoting—what I daresay has been heard by many in this room—the remark of Dr. Johnson, who said: 'I should be sorry to speak ill of any person in his absence, but I believe the gentleman in question is an attorney.' It represented pretty fairly the public view in those times, nor was it altogether unnatural, for at that period the solicitor in the general way was entirely uneducated. He passed no examinations whatever. He got into the profession by merely serving his time, and nine out of ten solicitors of a century since were persons who were almost utterly ignorant of the general law of the land, relying in that respect upon the assistance of the bar, who at that time held a very different relative position. The bar and the solicitors together now form a joint honourable profession, and let us hope, since the Law Society has inaugurated a system (which I had the honour to initiate in a paper I read on the subject), by which scarcely anything affecting the bar is attempted without consultation, that such course of action will be strengthened and im-

proved as we go on. Not till 1844, or thereabouts, was there any examination for solicitors. It is said that just one question or so was asked, as a matter of form, before a man was admitted, and probably many of you have heard the story, though some of our young friends have not, of an old judge and a young man who was about to become a solicitor. The old judge asked the young man how he would advise a person to act under certain complicated circumstances he named. The candidate in question, not having the remotest idea about it, after a little consideration, put on a grave face, and said: 'My lord, I think, in a case like that, the first thing I should do would be to draw 10*l.* on account of costs.' Said the old judge to the master: 'He will do, pass him,' and he passed accordingly. Let us now look to the statistics, and consider the probabilities of solicitors as a whole being able to earn anything like a comfortable subsistence by means of the law. I find that the proportion of the solicitors admitted thirty years ago was about the same as it is now—that is to say, in England there is one solicitor to about 2,500 of the population. The population has increased since that time something like 50 per cent., and the number of solicitors has increased at about the same rate. This would be all very well if the business kept pace with the increased number of inhabitants, but those who have had an opportunity of studying the matter know that in the High Court during the last few years there has relatively been a very appreciable decrease of work, and, though of course in the manifold affairs of this country, and having regard to its increasing importance among nations, there must always be a very large amount of business for men of our class to perform, it is a fact that during the last few years there has been the relative decrease just adverted to. I do not know whether it has occurred to many of the younger members of this society to examine into the matter, but it is a fact that if all the cases actually tried in the Courts from one year's end to the other were distributed equally among the solicitors, there would not be half a case apiece; moreover, if all the members of the bar practised there would not be one trial